

# SIERRA CLUB BULLETIN

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## RETROSPECT: NINETEEN-THIRTY-ONE

BY ANSEL EASTON ADAMS



MID-AFTERNOON . . . a brisk wind breathed silver on the willows bordering the Tuolumne and hustled some scattered clouds beyond Kuna Crest. It was the first day of the outing—you were a little tired and dusty, but quite excited in spite of yourself. You were already aware that contact with fundamental earthy things gave a startling perspective on the high-spun unrealities of modern life. No matter how sophisticated you may be, a huge granite mountain cannot be denied—it speaks in silence to the very core of your being. There are some that care not to listen, but the disciples are drawn to the high altars with magnetic certainty, knowing that a great Presence hovers over the ranges. You felt all this the very first day, for you were within the portals of the temple. You were conscious of the jubilant lift of the Cathedral range, of the great choral curves of ruddy Dana, of the processional summits of Kuna Crest. You were aware of Sierra sky and stone, and of the emerald splendor of Sierra forests. Yet, at the beginning of your mountain experience, you were not impatient, for the spirit was gently all about you as some rare incense in a gothic void. Furthermore, you were mindful of the urge of two hundred people toward fulfillment of identical experience—to enter the wilderness and seek, in the primal patterns of nature, a magical union with beauty. The secret of the strength and continuance of the Sierra Club

is the unification of intricate personal differences as the foundation of composite intention and desire.

You were musing thus as you sat in the shadow of Parsons Lodge and watched car after car spin over the meadows, cross the bridge, and cluster about the little rise of land supporting the soda springs. Old friends and initiates clamber out and unfasten tons of dusty luggage. Occasionally a huge green bus hurries along the road like an enormous beetle negotiating a rope. Then trucks of dunnage-bags come lumbering in and disgorge with startling finality. Around to your right rise clouds of smoke and a mist of many sounds—clattering of commissary implements, the hollow toc of well-swung axes, and incisive executive voices compelling the mountain of supplies into efficient order. Dan Tachet is up to his elbows in dough, and broadcasts staccato Gallic commands to his assistants. Francis Tappan is in everything at once, and order blossoms out of chaos.

As the day progressed the fabric of personnel became increasingly familiar—old friends and new friends, and people you never saw before, relieved of the dusty heat of the long foothill drive and eager for the high adventure. Present, of course, was William E. Colby, veteran commander of thirty outings. You knew who he was without inquiry—he carries with him a deep humanity, and the mood of rivers and forests and clean white stone.

The first dinner in camp is a great occasion, especially for the initiates, who receive illustrated instruction in the ethics of our primitive cafeteria. It is then you get your spoon, a sort of *visa* to all subsequent meals. If you lose it, you are in for diplomatic difficulties of no mean degree. The spoon is the insignia of the order; without it you are disfranchised and helpless. It usually reposes between the sock and boot-top, but some are drilled and hang on the bearers' bosoms like medals. Literally, you are born into the Sierra Club with a steel spoon in your mouth.

Following dinner, a general call for camp-fire wood is made, and several groups go off into the forest with husky intention, bringing in before dark a huge pile of gray and golden fuel. On these occasions you are aware of the rich magic of the Sierra dusk; the world flames with consuming fiery light and quickly smoulders to ashes of cold and amethystine gray. As the cool wings of night fold on the mountains the camp-fire eats ravenously into the dark, and you come with the others to sit on log or rock, or stretch out on the earth and give

happy attention to the affairs of the clan. There may be music, a short lecture, and group-singing at the end. You are drawn, as early man was drawn, by the enchantment of dusk and flame to the council-fire, to the beacon in the night. Later, as you gather yourself into your blankets, with camp-fire songs and the distant chiming of stock-bells blending in your ears, the inner reality of encircling mountains and scintillant heavens assumes a new significance and sleep comes on the rare benediction of the night.

The days are replete with adventure; the morning of the first tribal trek is memorable always. You feel a part of an important emigration; there is discipline and precision, but never of military quality. Camp is deftly broken, breakfast consumed, and the day is before you in a blare of light and enthusiasm. You will remember with delight the trail down along the river to Glen Aulin, the expansive meadows, the refined curvatures of granite and cloud, the waters rushing and chanting into the chasm of the Tuolumne. Going down with water by your hand you sense the directional aspect of the landscape in unison with the descending stream, you follow without fatigue the gestures of the cañon-walls toward the sinuous depths of the gorge. A camp in Glen Aulin can be only temporary, even though it be a fair and kindly place, for it edges on the huge depths of the Tuolumne Cañon, and one must not tarry for long in sight of rugged experience. Nevertheless, the afternoon at Glen Aulin gave opportunity for leisurely adjustment to the new world. You will recall Vernon Bailey showing us old marks of bear-claws high on an aspen shaft—and the good swimming, and the comfortable beds on leaf-packed ground.

Our descent through the Tuolumne Cañon to Pate Valley is historic; old-timers will recollect exciting and arduous days with a knapsack in a wild world of stones and snarling brush and raging waters, and now, for the first time as a group, we proceeded down the cañon on a magnificent trail that makes truce with spectacular ruggedness only at the Muir Gorge. There it leaves the river and threads over a buttress of granite, thereafter dropping back steeply to the stream, and winding down under sky-scraper cliffs to Pate Valley, which in itself is only a short tranquil broadening of the Tuolumne Cañon. There was much regret over the unprecedented low water—the Tuolumne held but a fraction of its normal flow, and the Water-wheel Falls were only suggested by feeble jets from glassy cups of

granite. It is a typical modern conceit to demand the maximum dimension and the maximum power in any aspect of the world—whether of men or mountains. It is better to accept the continuous beauty of the things that are, and forget comparisons of effects utterly beyond our control. An Oriental esthete would never question the exquisite charm of those pale threads of water patterned on shining stone. The American mode of appreciation is dominantly theatrical—often oblivious of the subtle beauty in quiet, simple things. One can never assert the superiority of the vast decorations of the Sistine Chapel over some pure experience in line by Picasso, or of torrents swollen by the floods of spring against the quiescent scintillations of an autumn stream.

"These with the rest, one and all, are to me miracles,  
The whole referring, yet each distinct and in its place."  
(*Miracles*: Walt Whitman.)

You have doubtless experienced certain emotional reactions quite beyond immediate analysis when confronted with relics of prehistoric culture *in situ*. These moods are intensified when the setting of such relics is of stern and rigorous beauty. In Pate Valley you found vast ancient oaks, and hoary granite cliffs blackened by time and sun. Inscribed on the huge rocky walls, in red-brown mineral pigment, are puzzling and fantastic pictographs of indeterminate age. It is rather futile to speculate on the meanings of these inscriptions; suffice it to say they invite an introspective and serious mood. The crude markings enter your consciousness with a quality of sad and remote associations—a frail stirring of racial recollections under the magic of old and inarticulate expression. You project a pathetic fantasy into the primitive isolation of this wild deep valley, and are sobered a little at the thought of aboriginal struggle and final extinction. For the moment you forget mountains and remember men.

Resuming the trail, an early hearty climb of about five thousand feet lifted us out of Pate Valley and of the cañon of Piute Creek as well, and set us on a high, undulating course in the direction of Rodgers Lake. We camped in the little valley just under Neall Lake for two nights, partly to gather strength after our climb out of the Tuolumne, but chiefly to give us time to explore Rodgers Lake and the surrounding hills. The lake is a rather typical Sierra lake, with an intricate verdant shore-line and a background of interesting elevations. The most prominent, Regulation Peak, presents lakeward a

soaring craggy aspect; the summit, however, is an irregular plateau broken with disintegrated granite crags. It is a good point for a literal view of practically all the major peaks of the Yosemite Sierra—you see beyond Tower Peak to the north, and to Banner Peak and Mount Ritter to the south. The glacier of Mount Lyell floats as a pale ship on a sea of desolate granite; the Sierra crest is drawn back and unresponsive in distance. It is a rather futile view—the great peaks are too remote for intimacy and too near for imaginative splendor. But the warm sun and diamond air, and the friendly, fantastic trees alleviate the severity of isolation.

The trail from Neall and Rodgers lakes to Benson Lake presents a new order of beauty. After leaving Rodgers Lake, you were undoubtedly first aware of the formal charm of Volunteer Peak. Throughout the Sierra there are many mountains of this type—pure forms in carven granite of precise and appropriate textures. Their beauty is beyond the limitations of scale. Although relatively small, Volunteer Peak fulfills every requirement of abstract line and perfection of substance, and pivots a region of intricate and impressive topography. Prior to descending the cañon leading down to Benson Lake, we climbed a granite crest that placed us in strategic view of the northern regions of the park. The complexity of contour inspires our imagination; while the aspect, in a material sense, is massive and severe, the mood is of crystalline delicacy. Here we faced the future of our excursion with the greatest enthusiasm, leaning our eagerness on the promise of ever-changing grandeur—the mysteries of curved cañons and half-revealed mountains—the surprise of sudden gardens in chaotic leagues of granite.

Our camp near Benson Lake was set in a refreshing jungle of lodgepole pine and willow, with a sturdy support of red fir. It was distributed over several little islands, interconnected by logs—a thoroughly woodsy environment with immense entrancing detail. Millions upon millions of friendly living things crowd the soil, the edges of pools, the spaces under the leaves, and in the sunny openings of the forest. A hushed and swiftly moving life enters your consciousness as myriad sparklings of light and color and the frail sounds of faery wings. Glorious dragon-flies move as bolts of blue lightning over the waters; mysterious larvæ propel their grotesque courses through the shallows. Iridescent clouds of gnats pulsate in the sun, bees hang on swaying blossoms, and small earthy creatures concern

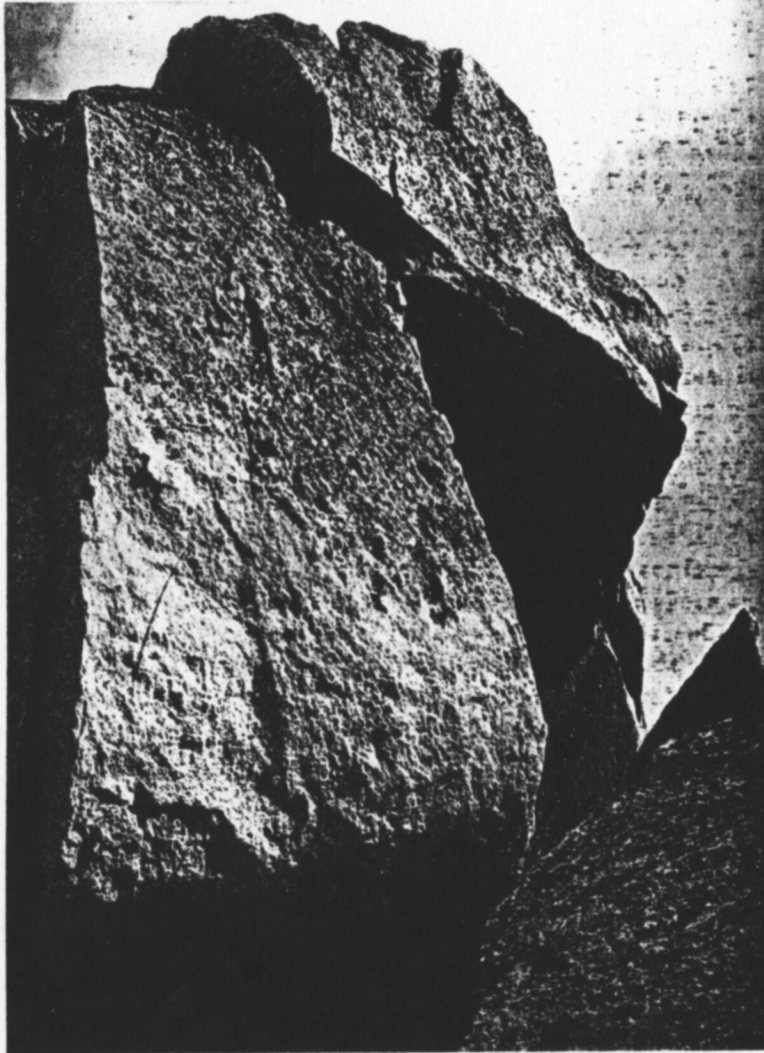
themselves with their problems of existence. You walked for nearly a mile through this luxuriant garden down to the lake. There you found a magnificent beach of clean crisp sand, curved like the new moon around the north shore of the lake, its tips set in stony heights that hold the tarn in a deep embrace. It is a strange and rugged setting—you will agree that the most impressive element is a dark mountain formed as of an ancient sarcophagus on which reclines a huge image reminiscent of the Egyptian figures of the dead, outlined in stone on the endless wall of sky. The remote silence of the soaring peaks, the sad horizon down-cañon to westward, and the endless sleep of the great figure on the mountain waiting for some gesture of eternity... you will remember the mood as a rare and mystical experience.

We were at Benson Lake for several days. In the eyes of the purists the club disgraced itself by turning out, almost entirely, on the beach for the greater part of the time—a rather inexplicable situation for a mountaineering organization. But the residue of the faithful tried to atone for their erring brethren—climbs were made to Piute Mountain and Seavey Pass, to Doe Lake, and to other pleasant destinations. A knapsack party of young climbers started for the mysterious northern regions of the park, to join us again in Matterhorn Cañon with new laurels of first ascents to their credit.

Our next move lay in a generally eastern direction—up past lovely Smedberg Lake and over Benson Pass, thence down Wilson Creek to Matterhorn Cañon. It was a rich day, full of the companionship of clouds and shining mountains. The following day found us in Virginia Cañon, and the day thereafter we were again at Soda Springs, bidding two-weekers farewell, greeting new companions, and enjoying an interlude of semi-civilization.

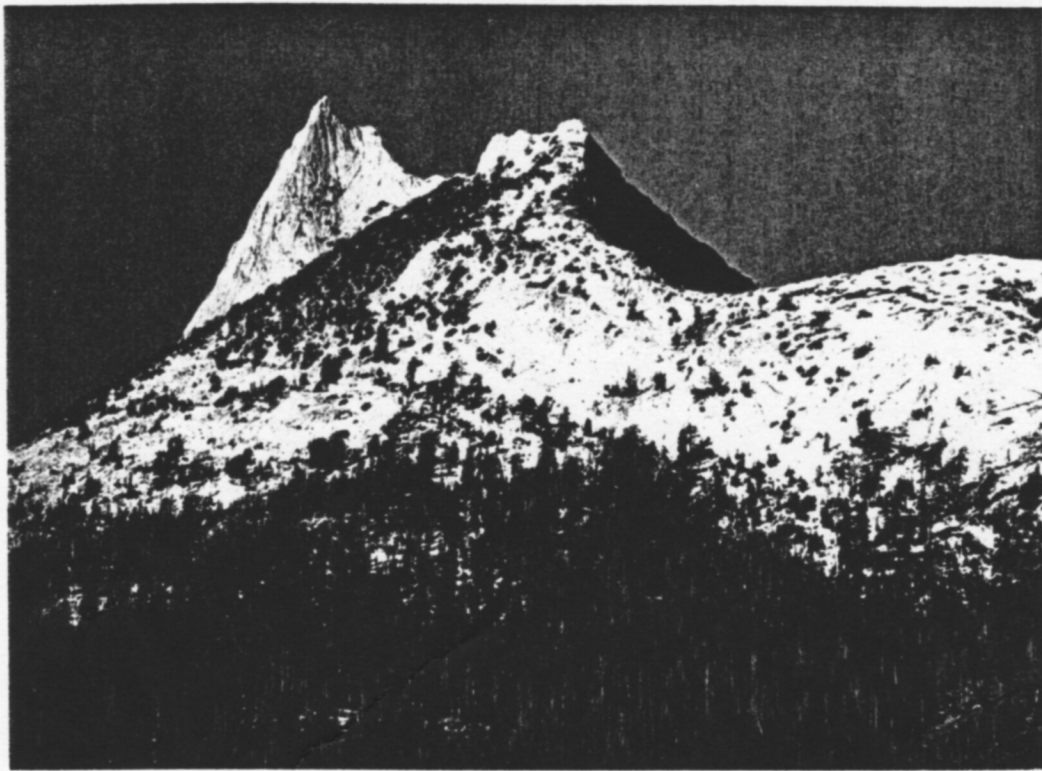
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It is convenient here to mention the important mountaineering that came to pass during the entire outing. While detailed notes will appear in another section of the BULLETIN, I must speak of the principal ascents made by Jules Eichorn and Glen Dawson and their companions. The ascents of Finger Peaks, Sawtooth Ridge, Matterhorn Peak, Echo Ridge, and the traverse of the three highest Minarets were among the most notable achievements. The famous climber, Dr. Underhill, joined us at Garnet Lake, and we were treated to fine exemplifications of the art of rock-climbing. This specific phase of



GRANITE  
Photograph by Ansel Easton Adams





CATHEDRAL PEAK

A Telephoto View from Soda Springs Camp      Photograph by Nathan C. Clark



mountaineering is a most important and refreshing sport, and young Dawson and Eichorn promise to carry out the tradition of European standards, and with their new art succeed to the laurels of Charlie Michael, Norman Clyde, and the heroes of earlier days.

Rock-climbing, as such, should be accepted with the greatest enthusiasm; yet I feel that certain values should be preserved in our contact with the mountains. While it is rarely a case of the complete ascendancy of acrobatics over esthetics, we should bear in mind that the mountains are more to us than a mere proving-ground of strength and alert skill. Rock-climbing should be considered a thrilling means to a more important end. Just what the end and aim of our appreciation of the mountains are, is an elaborate metaphysical equation, the solution of which is implied most clearly in these words of Whitman—

“...while the great thoughts of space and eternity fill me  
I will measure myself by them.”

The artist in man seeks ever to venture new phases of beauty; the wilderness will reveal the profound significance of life to him who approaches it without sentimentality or the possessive attitude. While vulnerable to material defacement, the mountains are beyond the exploitations of the baser spirit, yet ever captive to the imagination and the living dream.

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After an orgy of fresh fruit and hot baths the second two weeks section of the trip began. You felt the tension of great expectancy; the revised route was to take you through new and rugged regions, climaxing at the Ritter range—the Olympus of the central Sierra. During the first part of the outing we had followed more modest elevations and had given ourselves to roost in cañons and by quiet lakes; now you were to know the virile tang of high tarns and plateaus—and the clean brilliance of the summit of the range.

A crisp and early-morning start found us before midday on the Tuolumne Pass. This pass cuts through the Cathedral range, and all around you cluster striking sculptures of granite. To the south lifts the Merced range, a long line of high tumultuous stone, curving eastward to join the main crest of the Sierra. After an hour or so of moderate descent we were in camp near Babcock Lake at the base of a shapely cone of granite that heads the sharp fall of the cañon of Fletcher Creek. In the evening we walked out on the trail overlook-

ing the Merced Valley, and sat for long under a gracious moon. The sense of detachment that comes upon you in the presence of moon-illuminated mountains augments the reality of experience. Space becomes intimate; the world of fixed dimensions fades into patterns of exquisite delicacy, and you mingle your being with the eternal quietude of stone.

Our trip to the plateau overlooking Washburn Lake and the upper Merced Cañon was uneventful. Camp was made on the stream that flows from the south shoulder of Mount Florence: it was undoubtedly the first occasion upon which the quiet of this little basin had been broken by such a swarm of humanity. It could have fared worse—our group seems never to intrude on the spirit of the wilderness, for we know our contact is ephemeral and our gains not material. From this camp, the ascent of Mount Florence was made by several large parties, and Mount Maclure and a small crest south of Electra Peak were attacked as well. The ascent of Mount Florence is without intense adventure, but never tedious. We follow up the little water-course through timber-line meadows and plateaus, emerging after a mile or so on the huge talus-slopes of the mountain, which fold upward with increasing steepness to the crest. On the north, Mount Florence breaks into perpendicular cliffs, and forms the principal enclosure of a high glacial valley. From the basin of the Maclure Fork the mountain possesses a massive and imposing form, and there is a wealth of little lakes clustering near it. Mount Florence is one of my first mountains, and I shall always remember the spectacular aspect of Lyell seen through storm-clouds from the cool lichened rocks of its summit.

One of the objects of our encampment in this region was to acquaint the club with a hitherto unfamiliar section of the Yosemite Park—the upper basin of the Merced River. The main stream of the Merced heads in the great horseshoe of peaks comprising the Lyell group and the Merced range; the principal tributary is the Lyell Fork, whose cañon remains for me, after many years of Sierra experience, one of the supremely exquisite regions of the range. A short mile above the crossing of the Isberg Trail the valley widens into intimate and tranquil meadows, from which are seen, eastward, some satisfying peaks. You will recall one startling tower of greenish black stone, banded with veins of brighter rock that dart over the dark crag like bolts of lightning. Above the meadows lifts a thousand-foot shelf concealing

the first of a multitude of lakes. Continuing from there the valley turns steeply to the north, and leads, with ever-increasing grandeur, to the south base of Lyell. You will remember our way through this wild and intricate world of stone under impressive mountains, circling cold and steel-hued lakes. Standing under the battlements of Rodgers Peak, you observed that the curve of the valley had completely enclosed you in huge desolation; you were aware of the mood of a new and austere world. Here is all the sadness and beauty of stone—immense domes and ridges of matchless form, dark-crested summits, spires and crags and turrets beyond numbering. And towering above all, the huge precipice of Lyell leans on the northern sky.

While at this camp on the plateau we held our camp-fires on the spectacular brink of the Merced Cañon; the intense environment and the profound influence on us all of the revealed majesty of mountains will never be forgotten. Clustering about us were gnarled and ancient junipers, clinging with heroic courage to the immense cliffs. In the depths below, the Merced River assembled its tributaries and widened into the irregular oval of Washburn Lake. Across the chasm rose complicated precipices supporting the continuation of the plateau, and beyond, against the sky, towered a new aspect of the Merced range, overpowering in height and proximity and commanding contour. It was here we experienced a memorable evening of music which attained the quality of an earnest ceremonial. At dusk we gathered at the rim of the world and watched the last fires of sun-flare on the summits, and the valleys fill with cool rivers of night. Stone and hoary trees and the bodies of our companions merged in translucent unity with the world of mountain and sky; our fire leaped and writhed into the night, and clouds of querulous sparks soared high among the stars. A spirit of unearthly beauty moved in the darkness and spoke in terms of song and the frail music of violins. You were aware of the almost mystic peace that came over us all; the faces of those about us reflected the experience of calm revelation. There was the face of the great scientist dreaming of a beauty beyond all formula—the face of the artist gazing with unseeing eyes into the abyss of stone, yet seeing an infinitude of things—the face of the man of affairs, quiet and eager, confronted with new and exquisite experience—the face of adolescence, hushed and surprised at this promise of the world's sharp beauty. At the close of the music we went quietly through the darkness to our beds,

swaying and twinkling our lights among the trees and listening to the choir of golden bells from our animals at pasture.

We moved the next morning to the base of Vogelsang Pass, camping at the head of a long meadow on a branch of the Maclure Fork. Above us were some lovely lakes where we fished and lingered during the afternoon. On the day following we made the long march over Vogelsang and Ireland passes to the Lyell base camp. Some of the more ambitious of our group made a successful cross-country route up the Maclure Fork and over a series of ridges in the vicinity of Parsons and Simmons peaks, a shorter but exceedingly rugged and interesting excursion. The condition of Mount Lyell was unfavorable this season for an official climb, especially as there were so many novices among us. Accordingly, we stopped at the Lyell base camp for but one night, continuing next day over Donohue Pass to our camp at Garnet Lake. It is a magnificent trip from Lyell Base to Garnet Lake; we are given extensive views of the eastern aspect of the range and the colorful desert regions of Owens Valley. After crossing Rush Creek we skirted Thousand Island Lake, with the regal beauty of Banner Peak before us, and soon found ourselves on the indented rocky shores of Garnet Lake, where we camped for four glorious days. From here we climbed Mount Ritter and Banner Peak, and explored the basin of Shadow Creek and the environs of San Joaquin Mountain. Our general mountaineering adventures were carefully organized under capable leaders (a most important procedure when enthusiastic and inexperienced tyros are involved), and many were enabled to enjoy for the first time the thrills of major ascents.

Here we were favored with vigorous days of storm that augmented the severe grandeur of the peaks; sky and mountains were unified in patterns of dynamic splendor. You will remember an inspiring exploration that led us into the intimate regions west of Mount Ritter. All the early morning the sky was thronged with cloud and a sharp wind beat upon the crags. Before noon an eager arm of cloud clutched at the sun, and a sigh of shadow came over the mountains. Rippling patterns of wind flashed on turquoise waters—ice-fields became cold gray as the moon before dawn. It was good to feel the tiny flagellations of the rain—it was good to be buffeted by cool and fragrant air. And one must ever bow before the deep benediction of thunder. We sat for long under a rocky shelter while the storm



TUOLUMNE RIVER AT GLEN AULIN  
Photograph by Herbert P. Rankin

NOTE: The photographer, Herbert P. Rankin, is  
Bob Bothamly's grandfather



BEACH AT THE HEAD OF BENSON LAKE.  
Photograph by Ansel Easton Adams



moved over the pass and roared down-cañon to westward. High summits were veiled in the massive clouds that swirled and blended above us. Clustering on the frontiers of the forest were pale shafts of long-dead trees, poised in final quietness, enduring thunder and the lash of rain. . . .

Our last wilderness camp was at Alger Lake, 10,500 feet above the sea. From Garnet Lake we retraced the trail to Thousand Island Lake, thence followed a general easterly direction to Agnew Pass. There we felt the air and mood of the desert ranges, and passed under intensely colored cliffs of volcanic origin. Again crossing Rush Creek we climbed to Gem Pass, where we gained a grand view of Mount Ritter and Banner Peak—their summits soared into the sky as two huge horns, crossed and interlocked. After a mile or so of gently rising and falling trail we came to Alger Lake, and scattered our camp over a large area of sparse timber-line forest. The lake lies in a setting of stern and barren mountains—flaming heights of vari-colored rock. Emerald areas of pasture creep on the immense ruddy flanks, and ghostly limbs of albicaulis glimmer with static golden fire on the cold stone. At this last wilderness camp-fire we acknowledged the efforts and services of our personnel, especially commending the leadership of Francis Tappaan, who executed his difficult task with admirable precision and judgment. We may well look to him for the security and development of our outing institution; under the training of William E. Colby he has proven himself worthy of the toga of command.

As a mountaineering group our final salute to the Sierra was the crossing of Koip Pass, 12,400 feet high, one of the loftiest passes of the range. From the gentle curve of Parker Pass an uneventful trail to the Tioga Road delivered us in the end to civilization, and our great experience became a memory:

"Pure luminous color fighting the silent shadows to the last."